

A case of misatken identity

On Thursday I badly misread a sign, and it almost cost me my life.

Neil Postman in his amazing book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* gives us the adult version of 'stop, look and listen' or 'look left, look right – and only then cross the road.

He says, and I'm paraphrasing, you think the danger that's coming in the future is on your right don't you?
– 1984 and Big Brother:

having to live the lie,

becoming a captive culture,

losing your personal freedoms,

having your worst nightmare realised – that what you hate most, will ruin you.

But that hasn't come – so maybe it's safe to cross the road?

Except – you didn't look left, and you didn't listen.

And coming right on top of you is something you weren't expecting, Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World':

oppression dressed up as what you love;

a technology that entertains you for hours and hours
but robs you of your capacity to think –

you thought you were wading in the calm turquoise
sea of truth,

and instead, the reality is, you're drowning in an
ocean of utter irrelevancy;

you thought the lover beside you was your first love,
and you looked again,

and she had turned into a whore.

**To day I want to speak to you about how we might
see things and hear things as they are, and not as
they appear to be, and derive strength and joy from
that vision.**

Finding yourself on the move, in transition, is always a
dangerous time. It was so for the the Israelites, and
they panicked.

They misinterpreted Moses' delay.

They thought he'd abandoned them.

They thought his God didn't care.

Maybe there's another one, another god
somewhere else.

Any god will do; *anything*,
anything will do,

anything that distracts,
that takes the mind off the terrible reality of this
desert that surrounds you.

And so they create a god that makes sense in all this
madness –

a safe god,
one they can control and make in their own image;

one who feeds their distraction.

Because they panic, "*Do something. Make gods for
us who will lead us*", the flawed leadership cracks
open and panics too: they take the gold from the
people's hands and cast it into the form of a calf,
and shape it with an engraving tool.

And before you know it, despite Aaron's best
intentions and attempts to control the situation,

the party which has been thrown for the new god
gets out of hand into a full scale binge drinking
event.

Even the story teller gets carried away

and ends up writing a God into the script that's
made in his own anthropocentric image:

a petulant, angry fickle god who has to be
restrained, appeased:

"Leave me alone now, give my anger free reign to burst into flames and incinerate them. But I'll make a great nation out of you", he says to Moses, a Moses who has to try to calm his God down.

He says, "Why, God, would you lose your temper with your own people?"

Why? ... you brought them out of Egypt in a tremendous demonstration of power and strength.

Why let the Egyptians say,

'He had it in for them—he brought them out so he could kill them in the mountains, wipe them right off the face of the Earth.'

Stop your anger. Think twice, Moses says, about bringing evil against your people!

Think of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants to whom you gave your word, telling them 'I will give you many children, as many as the stars in the sky, and I'll give this land to your children as their land forever.'"

And the writer triumphantly records "And God *did* think twice.

He decided not to do the evil he had threatened against his people". 'God' 'evil'?

Is that God any better than the angry Poseidon in Greek mythology?:

who strikes the water with his trident,

creates giant tidal waves,

floods and storms;

And who,

whenever he strikes the earth,

earthquakes happen and sometimes even
volcanoes erupt?

But the writer assures us there, almost like the writer
here, that he isn't always that cruel and mean,

sometimes he can be quite nice –

like,

when he drives his horse-pulled chariot across the
water,

so the ocean and the seas are calm and sailors are
granted a safe passage to their destination.

But that doesn't last very long,
it seems.

Because the anger is still there under the surface,

he's just as likely to whip up huge waves and storms
within seconds and cause their death all over again.

PAUSE

It's easy to judge these poor fickle Israelites.

But it's better not to.

Rather, what's needed is insight and understanding.

The kind we find with the most remarkable woman called Etty Hillesum who wrote those amazing diaries between 1941-1943

before she left for the Auschwitz death camp.

She threw her last letter from the train as it left, and in it she writes

“We left ... singing.”

PAUSE

Let me take you into her world for a moment or two:

to see with her eyes, to hear with her ears,

to meet a quite different God, the kind of God that St Paul talks about in today's reading,

the God whose peace exceeds anything that we can imagine,

a God who isn't capricious,

who freely gives of a peace

which protects us from the onslaughts of life.

Etty's understanding begins with an appreciation

that everything that affects us has to do with the interconnection between what she calls the 'inner and the outer life'.

"It became clear to me," she writes, " (that) everyone shapes (their) fate from within."

That inner world is a landscape all of its own:

For Etty,

after you'd swept out the litter,

the bits and pieces

and cleared out the debris and the rubble under which God lies buried,

the landscape becomes a vast empty plain with none of that treacherous undergrowth to impede the view

not just one but many wide plains, infinitely wide with hardly a horizon in sight,

one plain merging into the next.

A world as real as the outer world.

"It is as if", she observes, "I were riding through the landscape of my own soul ... (in fact) the soul *is* the landscape.

This is no nebulous make-believe world. This a world that is almost brutally in touch with the the so-called 'real world'.

On the 19th February, 1942 on Thursday at 2.00pm she writes:

"I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves. And that seems to me the only lesson to be learned from this war. That we must look into ourselves and nowhere else." (245)

Here she echoes Sister Joan Chittister's call to the Benedictine Monastery of the heart, that gently beckons us to go deep into the self in order to find there the God who urges us to come out of ourselves to do the work of God: to live in union with God in the world around us.

Sister Joan almost uses the identical words that Etty uses:

"... one thing is inescapable: the way we deal with whatever happens to us on the outside will depend entirely on what we have become on the inside. Wherever we have fixed our hearts, whatever it is to which we have given them, will determine the way we experience all that is happening to us now."
(160)

And adds:

“stability of heart, not stability of place, that is the real monastic gift.” (ibid)

As ETTY works on her inner life she finds not only an increasing capacity and energy to deal with what's out there, but an amazing ability to understand what's actually going on.

As to inner strength, she says:

“ The threat grows ever greater and terror increases. I draw prayer around me like a dark protective wall, withdraw inside it as one might into a convent cell and then step outside again, calmer and stronger and more collected ... that inner concentration erects high walls around me within which I can find my way back to myself gather myself together into one whole, away from the distractions.” (364)

As to depth of insight, she comments:

“I don't think life is meaningless. And God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another. I have already died a thousand deaths in a thousand concentration camps. I know about everything and am no longer appalled by the latest reports ... and yet I find life beautiful and meaningful, from minute to minute. (456)

And later she reflects:

“I mean the reality of death has become a

definite part of my life... my life has been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability ... by excluding death from our life (paradoxically) we cannot live a full life and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it". (464)

Ah, if only Aaron and the Israelites stuck in their own kind of desert, internal and external, had been imbued with the same wisdom sitting on such young shoulders as Etty's, there may not have been such fear that day.

"... everyone shapes (their) fate from within..." such true words, and how apposite for our story today.

We don't judge, because we know ourselves too well. And as we get to know ourselves well enough we see more clearly the plight of others.

To the Gestapo agent who threatened and shouted at her, she felt no indignation, only compassion and would have liked to ask: "*Did you have a very unhappy childhood? Has your girlfriend let you down?*" (259)

Maybe Aaron, if he'd been working on his inner life, wouldn't have given in to fear, might have asked the people "*What are we so afraid of – we're free aren't we?*" And Moses might have

been even bolder as well as compassionate, and borrowed Etty's own words spoken to God without irony and a deep, deep understanding of the risk of love by which the whole creation is sustained:

"I shall promise you ... (to) try to help you God, to stop my strength ebbing away ... you cannot help us ... we must help you to help ourselves ... Alas there doesn't seem to be much You yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last ... (488-489) ... Dear God what will happen to me? No I shall not ask You before hand. I shall bear every moment, even the most unimaginable as it comes and if you should ever stumble over me, I shall pick you up again. I hope with you to come through." (495)

Does the picture of a vulnerable believer and a vulnerable God disturb you? It made me squirm a bit.

Because the classic image of the interventionist God suits us much better.

Leunig captures it well in his cartoon. A man finds God, but not as he expected him – lying on the ground. "Help me, I'm wounded." And God continues to just lie there bleeding. "You're not God,"

exclaimed the man, "God is ALL-POWERFUL." And God said, "I am all vulnerable. I'm in pain. I'm at your mercy.

Leunig concludes:

"These words were so unbearable to the man; so infuriating, that he finished God off right there and then."

If a pagan centurion recognized him, this vulnerable God at the cross "This must be the Son of God.", if a Jewess recognized him,

why can't we?

A question to be asked.

And right there the Gospel reading today suggests an answer.

In fact it's the punchline of today's reflection,

and serves, in an equally unnerving and unexpected way,

to raise the same question:

What kind of God do you believe in?

You see the whole point of Jesus' story is to challenge our understanding,

and whether or not we recognize him for who he is, and how the kingdom of God actually works,

as opposed to those other kingdoms and how they work.

Dr Scott Cowdell tells of a chaplain in an American prison running a bible study who reported that **one prisoner, when he heard this parable, responded that it presented a pretty awful picture of God.**

Yet this is the God in whom many Christians believe: exclusive, judgemental, and gracious only up to the point that we disobey.

This God of welcome is equally a God of damnation—like that King in the parable, who seemed as happy to violently destroy as he first was to welcome.

However, Dr Cowdell asks,

what if we've got this parable wrong as a Church, and that we're not meant to think of that king as God?

What if the Kingdom of heaven isn't like this Idi Amin or Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi-type King at all, who loves to play generous while hiding a murderous intent?

What if Jesus says "the Kingdom of heaven may be compared to," but is actually telling us that such a comparison is a mistake?

In my personal opinion, Jesus has done what the theologian James Alison says happens in the mimetic theory scenario: basically that it works like an Italian 2 Act opera- in Act 1 you are led to believe that certain people are the power brokers (like the King in this parable), only to discover that the situation is reversed, and that those who are weak and vulnerable (like the inappropriately dressed guest) are in fact the victims, the dissidents, the scapegoats are the protagonists of the story.

The king's outlandish behaviour exposes what's actually going on as opposed to what we think is going on.

Thus the King's magnanimous gesture is revealed for what it is: a sham.

The whole feast thing, the party thing is nothing more than an elaborate means of ingratiating himself with his people, and when they don't play the game, his true nature is exposed:

fundamentally, he's a narcissist who turns nasty when he's shown up as is the case with the dissident who refuses to conform.

Dr Cowdell once again:

Surely this is worldly power and worldly wisdom at work, worldly kingship,

the cynical business as usual of political life, of international affairs, of *Realpolitik*.

This is what we humans are like; it's not what God's like.

Rather, God's like the one at the end of the parable who won't play along, who's not content to support the system, who refuses to be another brick in the wall, [claims to be the foundation stone] who won't wear the wedding garment and blend compliantly into the crowd.

Etty's God is the one I believe in. The vulnerable God, the God who is at the centre of suffering, who witnesses it, the God who looks for people like us to take responsibility for his believability.

And it is Etty's style of belief I subscribe to.

That is, those who are disciples in the true sense, who are prepared to subject themselves to the discipline of inward preparation:

The greatest cause of suffering in so many of our people is their utter lack of inner preparation which makes them give up long before they even set foot in a camp.

15 July 1942 evening

Closing prayer: Etty's 25 November 1941 (154)

God take me by your hand. I shall follow you ... and not resist too much. I shall evade none of the tempest life has in store for me

*... I shall accept all the inevitable tumult and struggle. I delight in warmth and security but I shall not rebel if I have to suffer cold, should you so decree. I shall follow wherever Your hand leads me and shall try not to be afraid. I shall try to spread my warmth, of my genuine love for others wherever I go ... I don't want to be anything special, I only want to be true to that in me which seeks to fulfill its promise. I long for ... seclusion ... But I know I must seek You among the people out in the world.
Amen.*

